

## Empire City

In 1852 and 1853 explorers from the fledgling communities on the Umpqua estuary and the Rogue River Valley traveled to Coos Bay to examine its prospects. Some, like Patrick Flanagan of Scottsburg, traveled south through the Oregon dunes to the estuary. Others took the more challenging route of crossing the Coast Range into the Middle Fork of the Coquille watershed and then passing over the divide between Beaver and Isthmus sloughs to upper Coos Bay. The prospect of coal mines, immense trees standing on the edge of tidewater to produce lumber, agricultural lands along the rivers, and trade via the large harbor induced several to emigrate to the estuary. Settlers poured in during August and September, 1853 (Beckham 1971:8-10).

Although each claimant envisioned his land the site of a nascent metropolis, Empire City on the east side of the lower estuary captured the early lead. The territorial legislature created Coos County on January 19, 1854. As the only platted town and center of commercial activity, Empire City became the county seat of government (W.P.A. 1942:B-3). On April 17, 1856, the territorial legislature submitted a memorial to Congress to petition "*That Empire City be made a port of entry.*" The arguments centered on the "large and commodious harbor," the immense stands of timber, the region's "inexhaustible coal-field," and the awkwardness of vessels having to pass customs at Port Orford or San Francisco prior to entering Coos Bay (U.S. House of Representatives 1856:1-2). Years passed. Finally in 1873 with the illusive promise of mounting commerce as a consequence of the construction of the Coos Bay Wagon Road between the harbor and the Umpqua Valley, Congress named Empire City a port of entry. The U.S. government opened a custom house with David Bushing as the first collector (U.S. Senate 1873: 1-2; W.P.A. 1942:A-22).

Empire City faced west across the lower estuary of Coos Bay toward the sprawling reach of the North Spit (Figure 1). As the site of the sawmill and shipyards of Henry Heaton Luse, an enterprise founded in 1855, and as seat of

government, the small town remained for several decades an important place of human activity on the bay. Eventually Empire City was eclipsed by the development of Marshfield and North Bend farther up the bay. In 1896 voters moved the county seat to Coquille. The decision was nearly a death knell for Empire City. Its population plummeted and it languished until reincorporated in 1928 and platted as the New Empire, a development checked for many years by the Great Depression and World War II (Peterson and Powers 1952:98-99).



Fig. 1. Empire City, 1889, and its location due east of the North Spit of Coos Bay. The "Empire Mill" was erected by the Southern Oregon Improvement Company in 1884 (Dickins and Westdahl 1889-1890).